

VZCZCXRO9975  
OO RUEHBC RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV  
DE RUEHKA #0160/01 0431057  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
O 121057Z FEB 09 ZDK  
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8290  
INFO RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE  
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1973  
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 2757  
RHHMUNA/USCINCPAC HONOLULU HI

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 DHAKA 000160

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/PB, SCA/FO, AND S/CT;  
DEPT PLEASE PASS PEACE CORPS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [EAID](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#) [KV](#)  
SUBJECT: BOUCHER VISIT HIGHLIGHTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLOSER  
COOPERATION

REF: DHAKA 126

DHAKA 00000160 001.3 OF 004

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary  
=====

11. (C) During his February 7 - 8 visit to Dhaka, Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher stressed US desire to forge a close partnership with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's new government. In meetings with senior Bangladesh officials, Boucher discussed counterterrorism cooperation (including US support for the proposed South Asia Anti-Terror Task Force); the need to institutionalize democracy and create space for the opposition; and development assistance, including joint efforts to mitigate climate change. Hasina and her colleagues made a strong pitch for President Obama to visit Bangladesh to deliver his much anticipated address to the Muslim world. In a meeting with Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia, as with the majority party, Boucher stressed the importance of a meaningful role for the opposition. The visit underscored Hasina's belief that the US played a key role in ensuring a peaceful return of democracy and her desire to forge a closer partnership with the U.S. End Summary

Prime Minister: Counter-terrorism and regional cooperation  
=====

12. (S) Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina welcomed continued USG training for Bangladesh's security forces and asked that the USG look for ways to include Bangladesh, India and others from the region in multilateral training events. Hasina was steadfast in her commitment to fighting terrorism and in her desire to prevent Bangladesh from becoming a haven or transit point for international terrorist groups. Recalling past attempts on her life, Hasina claimed "Allah saved me, perhaps because I was meant to be Prime Minister again." Hasina said South Asian states should work bilaterally and multilaterally as appropriate to combat terrorism, "the enemy of humanity." She expressed confidence that India-Bangladesh relations would improve and criticized attempts by opposition parties to politicize the issues of transit and trade. Hasina asserted that Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) continued to conduct operations from and training on Bangladesh's soil. She asked Boucher to tell Pakistan that ISI "should not play games here."

13. (C) Hasina outlined her government's priorities: increasing the incomes of Bangladesh's millions of poor;

addressing the country's energy crisis; and developing a better social safety net for the poor. She expressed a commitment to democracy and to fighting corruption but dismissed the Caretaker Government's anti-corruption drive as being largely political. During a one-on-one, Boucher raised BNP concerns about the allocation of front-row seats in Parliament and the withdrawal of security protection for Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia. Hasina acknowledged the points but did not appear inclined to agree to the BNP's requests. Hasina made a strong pitch for Bangladesh to be the venue of President Obama's first speech to the Muslim world, which the President had cited in his recent interview with al-Arabiya (reftel). She asked Assistant Secretary to convey her invitation to the President, noting that Bangladesh was a 90 percent Muslim country that had just elected a government committed to secularism and combating terrorism.

#### Opposition Denounces Election and New Government =====

14. (C) Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia reiterated the BNP's desire to play a constructive role as the opposition in Parliament and pledged continuing cooperation with Washington. She and her advisors (BNP Secretary General Khandker Delwar Hossein; former ambassador to Washington Shamsheer Chowdhury; and BNP advisor Reaz Rahman) then criticized the parliamentary and upazila elections as neither free, fair nor credible. (The Ambassador replied that the Embassy had seen no evidence of significant abuses on election day and that the people of Bangladesh appeared to believe the elections were credible.)

15. (C) Khaleda said only the government could resolve the ongoing controversy over the number of front-row seats

DHAKA 00000160 002 OF 004

allotted to the opposition in parliament, over which BNP MPs are currently boycotting sessions. She asked A/S Boucher to intercede with the government to resolve this impasse and for USG assistance in persuading the AL government to reinstate her personal security protection, recently down-graded by the government to a level less than Sheikh Hasina had received when she was Leader of the Opposition. Zia criticized Sheikh Hasina's failure to fulfill her promise to offer the position of Deputy Speaker to the opposition. She said law and order had deteriorated since Hasina took office, noting the death of 32 BNP activists at the hands of AL "thugs" since the election.

16. (C) A/S Boucher encouraged dialogue among political parties, noting the importance of the opposition's role in any democracy and reiterating the USG's hope for constructive solutions to avoid reversion to the confrontational politics of the past. Zia responded she had no desire to revert to the past but asserted that "everything" depended on the actions of the AL government. On BNP reform, Zia said the BNP had begun a party-wide grass-roots review of appropriate areas for reform. A/S Boucher noted that independent institutions such as the Elections Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission and the courts had key roles to play in a democracy, and urged that they be strengthened. Referring to the February 9 visit of the Indian Foreign Minister to Bangladesh, A/S Boucher noted there were good opportunities for Indo-Bangladesh trade, transit and counterterrorism cooperation. Zia responded the two countries had "a huge trade imbalance," and India relied on non-tariff barriers to avoid importing Bangladeshi goods. She touted the 2001-2006 BNP Government's anti-terrorism record and stated that Bangladesh should never be used to launch attacks on third countries. Zia also questioned Boucher about progress in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East Peace Process.

#### Meeting with Minister and State Minister of Foreign Affairs =====

17. (C) Foreign Minister Dipu Moni and State Minister Hasan Mahmud noted the Awami League's large margin of victory, interpreting this giving the government a clear mandate to fight terrorism and corruption. Moni stressed the government's commitment to establishing good governance; continuing anti-corruption efforts; safeguarding human rights; and the need to counter climate change. Moni requested A/S Boucher's assistance on several issues, including establishment of a South Asia Anti-terrorism Task Force; promotion of human rights; extradition of fugitives implicated in the August 1975 assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; market access and Millenium Challenge Corporation eligibility; and Bangladesh observer status at the London G-20 meeting. Echoing the Prime Minister's request, Moni also asked that President Obama consider Bangladesh as a venue for his address to the Muslim world.

18. (C) A/S Boucher praised Bangladesh as an example that religious faith, democracy, and modernization were not incompatible. He underscored the USG's intention to continue to partner with Bangladesh to build democracy and enhance prosperity. Boucher also urged the new government to consider recognizing Kosovo, prompting the Foreign Minister to note that she had discussed this with the Ambassador and initiated an internal GOB review of the issue. Over lunch, Foreign Secretary Towhid Hossain expressed hope that the success of Bangladesh's democratic transition would make it easier to work on issues related to market access, MCC eligibility, and debt relief.

Home Affairs Minister: Need to Improve Security

19. (C) Minister Sahara Khatun, State Minister Sohel Taj, and Secretary Abdul Karim pledged to cooperate fully with the United States and other friendly states to fight terrorism. Both Ministers acknowledged the grave responsibility they had undertaken and underscored the importance of ensuring peace and security to allow the new government to implement its ambitious election manifesto. They expressed appreciation for ongoing, and future, USG assistance provided to law enforcement and border security agencies. The Home Ministry leadership highlighted their desire to depoliticize and professionalize the police, and promised to update the police ordinance of 1861, review police pay, and ensure internal accountability. A/S Boucher noted ongoing USG efforts to

DHAKA 00000160 003 OF 004

strengthen respect for human rights and develop accountability mechanisms for the Rapid Action Battalion.

110. (C) The Ministers agreed the Battalion had an important role to play in fighting terrorism and underscored the GOB's commitment to end extrajudicial killings by security forces. A/S Boucher welcomed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's call for the creation of a South Asia task force to fight terrorism and promised to look for ways to support Bangladesh's efforts to work with its neighbors to deny space to violent extremists. The Ministers stressed the importance of enhanced information sharing and bilateral and regional cooperation based on mutual respect, promising to reciprocate USG efforts to fight terrorism. A/S Boucher acknowledged Bangladesh's achievements in restoring democracy and enhancing prosperity, and pledged to continue to look for ways to further strengthen cooperation.

Parliament Speaker Hints at Compromise; Asks for Training

111. (C) Speaker of Parliament Abdul Hamid and Deputy Speaker Shawkat Ali thanked A/S Boucher for the USG's support in holding free and fair elections and returning democracy to Bangladesh. Hamid said the Elections Commission would have to continue playing a neutral role in order to ensure that future elections were free and fair. The Speaker and Deputy Speaker said the first session would focus on passing as

legislation the ordinances promulgated by the Caretaker government. The Speaker explained that negotiations were underway to resolve the impasse over seat allocation that had prompted a BNP boycott but hinted that an agreement would have to wait until the next parliamentary session. A/S Boucher stressed the USG desire to see a healthy democratic debate where the opposition's voice could be heard.

¶12. (C) The Speaker noted that more than 50% of MPs were new members and welcomed the National Democratic Institute's upcoming training course on rules, procedures and conventions. He expressed hope that other donors, including UNDP, would resume parliamentary strengthening programs. He said further funds would have to be allocated for offices and support staff of the members. The Speaker confirmed that Chairmanship of four of the 37 standing committees would be offered to the BNP. Chief Whip Abdus Shahid speculated that this could include the Public Accounts Committee, which examines matters relating to auditing government spending. The Speaker, Deputy Speaker and Chief Whip agreed that public expectations were high and that they would need the cooperation of the opposition. Boucher said the USG would seek to expand on areas of cooperation with the new government.

#### Meeting with Civil Society

¶13. (U) Over seventy guests attended a reception hosted by the Ambassador in A/S Boucher's honor. The guests included six Cabinet Ministers, members of parliament, politicians, journalists, businessmen, academics, diplomats, and development workers. The guests responded positively to remarks from the Ambassador and A/S Boucher, including the latter's reference to Secretary Clinton's fond memories of her past visit to Bangladesh. Guests at the reception stressed the parallels between the recent elections in the United States and Bangladesh and spoke enthusiastically about the opportunities for enhanced bilateral cooperation across the board.

#### Press Coverage

¶14. (U) A/S Boucher's visit received front page coverage in all major newspapers during both days he was in Dhaka. The media highlighted bilateral counter terrorism cooperation and USG support for the proposed South Asia Task Force. The press also noted A/S Boucher's comments noting that negotiations for a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement had been placed on hold as the new U.S. Administration sets its trade negotiating priorities. There was also keen media interest in maritime security cooperation between the U.S. and Bangladesh.

#### Comment

DHAKA 00000160 004 OF 004

¶15. (C) Sheikh Hasina and her government rolled out the red carpet for A/S Boucher, arranging meetings with key Cabinet Ministers on the eve of the Indian Foreign Minister's visit. She clearly believes the USG played a crucial role in ensuring free, fair and credible elections and a peaceful transition from the Caretaker Government. Both Hasina and Boucher stressed the opportunities for closer cooperation on a range of bilateral and regional issues, most importantly on fighting terrorism. The one area where Hasina's actions since becoming Prime Minister seem to be falling short of her pre-election commitments is in providing meaningful space to the opposition. It was clear from Boucher's visit that Hasina and Khaleda have yet to bury the hatchet.

¶16. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher cleared this message.

